



I entered my internship with the Smart Community Corps this summer with an open mind.

This was as much from necessity as anything, because one of my main objectives this summer was to figure out what I want to do with my education from Georgia Tech. I started my master's program in the School of Public Policy last year coming from a completely unrelated background: I was in journalism, covering high school sports, for three-and-a-half years and had spent the past two working for a newspaper in Forsyth County.

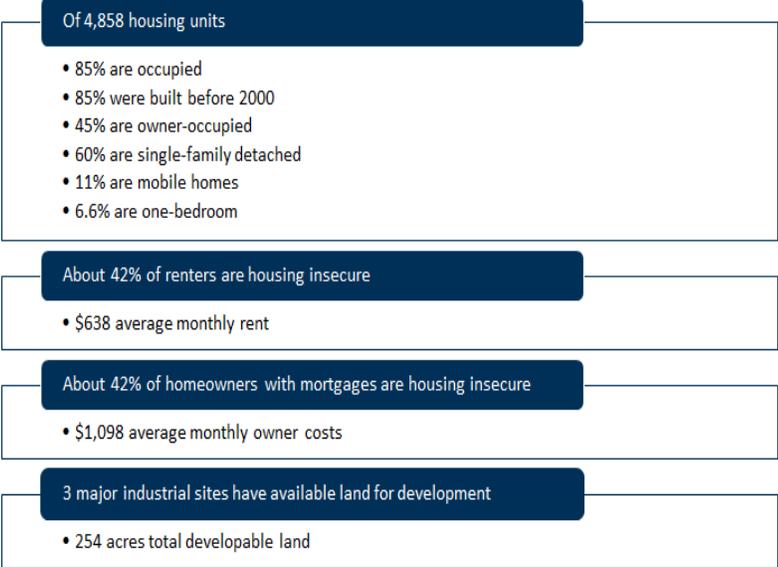
I certainly haven't regretted my decision to come to Georgia Tech, but to be frank, I didn't start with a totally clear idea of the job I wanted upon graduation. So when the opportunity to get my proverbial feet wet working on an economic development project with the City of Douglas arose, I jumped at the chance. The fact that I would be advised and guided by Nancey Green Leigh, a professor in the School of City and Regional Planning and an internationally renowned expert in local economic development, made this opportunity even more exciting.

But first, I had to figure out what working on economic development entailed. It's a field with broad applications and a number of definitions – the two-inch-thick textbook I read would back this up – but this is a good start: It's not the same as economic growth. Growth can certainly be part of an economic development process, but development itself is a much more holistic and comprehensive process, focused on wage growth, sustainability in employment and environmental impacts, and even areas such as racial and economic justice.

It's much more complicated than simply attracting jobs, because of that, my group's work this summer would just comprise one facet of an economic development process. Working with two fellow Georgia Tech students – Sarah Dyott, a master's student, and Nijah James, a rising senior – I helped compose a comprehensive profile of Douglas, examining the city's population, labor force, industrial composition, and amenities. We also offered a set of development strategies that Douglas could pursue.

The final report wound up being more than 60 pages, but I'll offer a quick summation.

Douglas, which is in southeast Georgia, three hours from Atlanta and an hour northeast of Valdosta, is like many rural communities in that it first developed as an agricultural community. (And for many years, it was one of the most productive in the state.) But in the middle of the 20th century, it rapidly transitioned to an industrial



powerhouse for its size. It now hosts large employers like a Walmart distribution center and Premium Peanut, the world's largest peanut shelling facility.

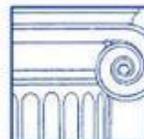
Douglas is not a dying community – its population is actually growing, unlike many small rural areas in the state – and it has a relatively low unemployment rate and an active downtown shopping district. But the city's residents are also poorer, less educated, and get paid less than those in the rest of the state on average. A significant percentage of the population is also rent and mortgage-burdened, and the community regularly experiences "brain drain," which in turn can make it difficult for employers to find the highly skilled employees they need.

To form these conclusions, we dug through a raft of U.S. Census Bureau data and previous reports on the city and conducted more than 20 interviews with public officials, business owners and other citizens of Douglas. We did all of this remotely, via phone calls and videoconferencing software, and while we had relatively little technical issues with these methods, I personally couldn't help but feel that we lost some of the nuance that would have existed in in-person conversations. Still, I think that we did the best we could, given the strange circumstances, and that we had a productive summer overall.

I'm still not 100 percent set on the career I want to pursue after graduation, but this internship experience has broadened my horizons and given me a clearer idea of the attributes I want in a job. I want to do a job that has the potential to contribute to the public good, and this internship fulfilled that criterium, with its main stretch goal being the betterment of all sectors and social classes of Douglas. I would also like to continue to use the investigative and creative skills that I developed in journalism, which was another box that this internship checked off: By gathering facts and viewpoints, we were essentially telling the overarching story of Douglas' past and present moments.

I am thankful for having an internship of any sort this summer, given the difficulties that many of my classmates experienced, but I am particularly lucky that the Smart Cities Corps gave me such a great opportunity to gain real-world, easily applicable experience in a field that I've found to be very compelling.

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